

Written Testimony of Representative Luis V. Gutiérrez (IL-04)
Make It in America: What's Next?
PANEL 1: Rebuilding America's Promise

Whenever I give a floor speech about immigration or if I go on Fox news, I always get a few predictable reactions. First, I am told to go back to Mexico, even though I was born in Chicago to a Puerto Rican family. And second, I am asked why I spend time working on immigration when I should be “helping Americans.”

I get the first one. Most people do not do a very good job of distinguishing between Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, or any other group, and frankly when I hear Donald Trump say most Mexicans are rapists and drug-dealers, I know he is insulting my family too.

The second one is a little more complicated and it is why I am here today, because I think many people see both the politics and the economics of immigration as a zero-sum game. In many people's minds, what you do for immigrants is necessarily something you are not doing for the people who were born here. But immigration is not a zero-sum game at all. Policies that promote legal immigration and legal status for immigrants actually make things better for everyone else, all Americans across the board.

As one advocate who works on immigration issues in Tennessee likes to say, immigrants are not here to take a slice of the pie away from us, they are here to build a bigger pie.

One of the best examples of this is in my home town, Chicago. Everyone knows about the Magnificent Mile, the section of Michigan Avenue that is the main street of the Midwest economy.

What most people do not know is that the second biggest jobs and tax revenue-generating corridor of the City of Chicago is 26th Street, in the heart of *La Villita*, or Little Village, the center of the Mexican-American community in Chicago and the economic engine of my District.

Take a drive down 26th Street on a Saturday and let me tell you what you will see: First of all, you will be driving very slowly because this is a busy business district and parking is scarce. Secondly, you will see parents toting their kids around for a day of shopping and errands. They buy, the business owners sell, and the City gets a cut in the form of taxes.

Over in the Pilsen neighborhood, 18th Street is not far behind as the next most important business district and tax revenue base in the city.

Today's immigrants are simply part of a pattern that has been repeating itself for as long as we have been a nation.

Immigrants with few resources build up congregations and parishes, then neighborhoods and business districts, and then businesses and corporations. And eventually they are so integrated into our society that we cannot imagine our cities without their contributions.

Whether it was the Irish, the Italians, or the Polish, Chicago has given people opportunity and they paid it back by making the pie bigger.

African-Americans who fled slavery and Jim Crow in the South or my parents who fled poverty in rural Puerto Rico are a lot like immigrants today. We are usually treated with a great deal of skepticism and sometimes outright hostility at first, but eventually each group takes their place contributing to the community and the economy. They make the pie bigger.

But immigrants do not just contribute to the economy as consumers and employees—although it should be noted that immigrants have the highest workforce participation rates in the American economy. More than that, they are creating jobs as entrepreneurs and business owners.

A Pew Research Study released last week shows that immigrants are more likely to be self-employed than the native population. And that in turn expands the economy and workforce, for both the native born and immigrant workers. Not only did Sergey Brin found Google, but he and other immigrant entrepreneurs make native-born job-creators like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates improve their game because of the competition.

Longitudinal studies show that when immigrant workers gravitate to sectors of our economy, they increase the productivity of the native born and have a positive impact on wages. That's right, the evidence shows wages for native-born workers tend to improve when there are more immigrants.

Despite everything the immigration naysayers believe, the reality is that immigrants tend to fill gaps in the economy, take jobs where there are shortages, and do not tend to compete directly with native workers for the same jobs, as shown by a new Urban Institute study.

For example, there are plenty of capable American workers who could pick our fruits and vegetables, but there are not many Americans who aspire to that job. I want for my daughters what most people want for their kids, a good paying job indoors, not a job that pays far less out in the fields. The reality is that 90 percent of the workers in some sectors of agriculture are immigrants and many are undocumented because we do not have a functioning legal immigration system to accommodate this reality and protect their rights as workers.

So, despite all the rhetoric, despite all the simplistic answers we get from politicians trying to scare you into voting for them, the reality is that immigrants are not taking a piece of our pie. Instead, on average, immigrant workers are contributing and making a bigger pie. And as it turns out, they are also picking, washing, and packaging the apples, the cherries, and the blueberries we have in those pies.

Thank you very much for letting me testify today. I look forward to your questions.